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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Extent, Causes, and Suggested Solutions

The National Advisory Council on Adult Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report about the prevention of adult illiteracy. It discusses the reasons why estimates of the number of illiterates vary so much, and reveals why it is so difficult to substantiate any of the estimates.

Who are the adult illiterates? They are high school dropouts and high school graduates, immigrants, and illegal aliens. This report focuses on those who have come through our public education system. Since schools are the entity charged with transmitting literacy, they offer the best hope of remedy.

American public education today is viewed, in this report, from the perspective that shaped it: yesterday's educational theories and philosophies. Such an approach, together with a discussion of the effects of social change, shows the forces that have influenced our educational system, and thereby explains why current problems exist and why there are barriers to the solutions of these problems. What were these forces? The increased acceptance of progressive educational philosophy by unionized educators resulted in substantial changes in curriculum and resistance to accountability for student achievement. The unprecedented intrusion of the courts and the federal government into local schools resulted in a loss of local control. The concurrent social upheaval resulted in a loss of adult authority. All converged to disrupt the traditional educational checks and balances and changed our educational system. While recognizing that many things influence the level of literacy attained by our citizens, this report concludes that educators themselves are largely responsible for many of the problems. Finally, the report offers recommendations for improving achievement and reducing illiteracy, and gives the reasons for these recommendations.

The scope of this report is broader than that of most of the other recently published ones, because a more thorough explanation is needed of how our educational system functions. Only then can we understand why many of the reforms that are currently being called for are indeed necessary, but will also be difficult to achieve.

The National Advisory Council on Adult Education (NACAE) decided to compile this information for several reasons. The NACAE was unable to determine the extent of adult illiteracy in this country and therefore could not determine how many people were not being served by the present system. There simply were insufficient data on which to base considered recommendations to the President and to Congress.

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Further, there seemed to be no plans to gather the necessary data. At the same time there was intensified public clamor about literacy problems and Council members were constantly admonished to recommend increased funding to remediate adult illiterates.

They were also told that the number of illiterates was growing. Consequently, the Council began to question why taxpayers should fund the expansion of a system to accommodate an increasing number of adult illiterates when these same taxpayers were already supporting free public compulsory education. Moreover on visitations to adult education centers, members encountered students who were obviously capable of learning but who had been passed through the system without becoming literate. In addition, our members learned that approximately one million young Americans drop out of school annually—obviously potential candidates for an already over-crowded and apparently under-funded system of adult education. Becoming increasingly concerned with prevention as well as remediation of adult illiteracy, the Council appointed a committee to prepare a report that would:

- determine the reasons for the widely varying estimates of illiteracy in America,
- identify the reasons why the agency charged with transmitting literacy, the public school system, has not accomplished this task to the satisfaction of many citizens, recommend improvements, especially for the educational system, to reduce and ultimately eradicate — to the extent possible — illiteracy.

While the committee's work was underway, other reports were being published. After reviewing these reports, committee members felt increasingly justified and reinforced in their decision to question the *status quo*. At the same time, they were concerned that the Council's work might be redundant, and that the public might have become satiated with recommendations for reform. Neither fear seems to be realized, and while obviously some topics in the Council's study are covered in other documents, this report contributes to the current reform movement in that it:

- puts the recent achievement decline into historic perspective,
- discusses the causes of educational problems as well as the barriers to their solutions,
- takes a broad approach, treating some facets of the educational system not discussed in other reports; e.g., the role of school boards,
- considers all levels of education,
- gives explanations for its recommendations,
- focuses on adult illiteracy as a consequence of a failure of our educational system and suggests that the kinds and extent of illiteracy be clarified in order to effect solutions.

The Extent of the Problem

There is much confusion about the extent of illiteracy in the United States because definitions of literacy vary greatly, resulting in conflicting estimates of the extent of the problem. Adding to the confusion is the fact that grade-level completion and census statistics are not reliable indicators of literacy attainment. Nor is literacy a static concept. The impact of changing and differing literacy needs on illiteracy estimates is well-recognized, as is the relatively new concept of "functional" illiteracy. The relationship between literacy and the economy is discussed in light of business and industrial needs for and concern over the lack of a literate workforce. Other factors impacting estimates of illiteracy that are discussed are: the needs of the military, the escalation of credentials, the increasing numbers of refugees and immigrants, the importance of cultural literacy, the lack of reliable data, and the possibility of inflation of estimates. The truth of the matter is that we really do not know which, if any, of the estimates of the number of illiterates is accurate. We should know. It is important that we clarify the problem in order to solve it effectively. We must, for example, stop confusing the inability to read with the inability to function successfully in society. The designation of different levels of illiteracy is suggested to identify the problem with greater precision and to offer better solutions.

The Causes of the Problem

Because Americans charge the public school system with creating and maintaining a literate citizenry, this committee examined the evolution of that system. From the earliest days of public schooling, different groups have held different expectations of education. But as the public school system developed a virtual monopoly on the delivery of educational services, the lack of commonly held expectations and the limited choice of educational facility combined to spawn a host of questions about American public schools: Should education be offered for its own sake or as training for a career? Should attention be directed toward developing the whole child or concentrate on the development of cognitive skills? Should methodology include experiential learning or focus solely on rote learning? Should students be grouped by ability or heterogenously? Should children be bused or served by neighborhood schools? Should the focus be on insuring equality or insisting on excellence? There are more. One of

the longest-standing conflicts, but one that is confined mostly to the profession, is the degree to which phonics should be emphasized in reading instruction.

The historic dilemmas and conflicts have been exacerbated in recent years by social changes: an increasingly materialistic and permissive society; the turmoil resulting from the civil rights struggle; the phenomenal and not-yet comprehended impact of television; the changing perception of childhood; and the widespread use of mind- and mood-altering substances.

In addition, several agencies in American society redefined their roles in relation to public education during the last 25 years. Federal regulations concerning vocational and technical education, handicapped students, adult basic skills programs, desegregation, educational media, disadvantaged students, and bilingual education increased from 92 in 1965 to nearly 1000 in 1977. Federal projects, programs, and pilot studies were instituted. Court decisions on education rose from 112 in 1956, to 729 in 1966, to more than 1200 in 1970. Statutes and court rulings undercut administrative authority. Decisions that had once been made in the principal's office were made at the judge's bench. Special interest groups instigated much of this increased governmental attention to redress perceived unresponsiveness and red tape, and because federal governmental agencies could be more easily influenced than local boards of education. Special-interest groups learned the process of bypassing school boards, both local and state.

But perhaps the greatest single cause for the recent revolution in education was the evolution of progressive education. The first wave of progressive education reflected a larger humanitarian effort to help Americans adjust to the new urban-industrial society which emerged in the latter part of the 19th century. But the "life adjustment" phase of progressive education which followed World War II was marked by an increased emphasis on non-academic education. Even though the moves away from traditional education were strongly criticized through the years, critics were ignored, and the ascendency of progressive education continued. The most recent manifestation of this philosophy occurred in the 1960s when social concerns brought another wave of educational responses: team teaching, student contracts, "hands on" learning, a "relevant" curriculum, teachers as facilitators, student rights, anecdotal reporting. Curriculum changes included "new math," social studies instead of history, and the replacement to a large extent of classic literature and finished compositions with contemporary works and group discussion. Also, curriculum choice was greatly expanded. In some schools the only core requirements for graduation were physical

education, health, American history, and government.

Organizational changes included open classrooms, individualized instruction, free schools, semester and mini courses, and the discontinuation of ability grouping. Behavioral standards were relaxed and homework minimized. At the same time grade inflation and social promotion resulted in a general lack of discipline and respect for learning.

The lowering of standards hid problems. Eventually though, by the 1970s, when remedial English courses had become necessary for half the entering freshman class of some colleges, unprepared college freshmen and illiterate high school graduates were becoming obvious. Less obvious were students and adults who lacked self-discipline, respect for society, positive attitudes and values, a sense of personal accomplishment, and the skills to achieve in the competitive world beyond the school room. All were results—victims—of a system that, in trying to be all things to all people, failed considerably with many who had the potential to achieve much more.

For before students can practice effective thinking that is so necessary in a democracy, they need command of the essential tools. They must be able to read with comprehension; they must be able to put complex ideas into intelligible prose; they must have some command of mathematical thinking; and finally, they must have a store of reliable information to draw upon. They are much more likely to acquire these essential tools if they have a positive attitude toward learning. This attitude can be fostered, as it once was, through teaching moral and character education and the work ethic. Such instruction has been abandoned even though polls show that parents favor it, and what little research there is in this area shows that it helps to prevent discipline problems.

What has happened to the system? How could a country so committed to providing education to all its citizens be failing to do so? Where are the controls?

The main control used to be the parents who supported the schools through parent-teacher organizations and local school boards. However, for a variety of reasons, parents are no longer involved with the schools as they once were. Moreover, the consolidation of schools resulted in larger school districts with one-eighth the number of lay school board members elected by the parents nationally.

The education establishment became more powerful, for even the most committed board members were rarely a match for professional administrators and unionized teachers. Teacher unions became skilled advocates for their constituents, putting teachers in a direct adversarial relationship with school boards,

and dissipating the authority of school administrators. Yet at the same time that professional educators and unions were gaining power, academic achievement was declining.

Can we hold the schools responsible for that decline? Given the fact that professional educators determined programs, that teachers retained control over what was taught and how, and that the schools instigated the educational changes that proved to be so detrimental, the answer is yes. Even though this period saw substantial social upheaval, research and historical precedent show that school-controlled efforts can succeed despite such deterrents. A review of public school achievement, including SAT and other test scores, supports this position.

Undoubtedly, much of what happened was motivated by the desire to help low-achieving students. While we certainly need to do all that we can, within reason, to assist low-ability students, we need also to accept the fact that equal opportunity does not guarantee equal results. We must once again challenge students of every ability level through consistent expectations and improved standards.

In the words of James Lynch and Bertrand Evans:

> . . . certain prevalent but nonsensical equations . . . should be abolished: namely, that what is great is difficult; that what is difficult is uninteresting; that what is uninteresting is unteachable. Neither editors nor teachers should be afraid of giving students "what is good for them." If students knew what was good for them, they would need neither teachers nor textbooks. The vapid theories that advocate teaching the "whole child," removing all difficulties from his path, and being permissive at every turn cannot be allowed to put in jeopardy the literacy of a whole nation.*

Suggested Solutions to the Problem

Curriculum and Instruction

1. Improve the teaching of reading.
2. More strictly evaluate educational materials, and re-examine the selection process. Materials should be sufficiently challenging to students.
3. Upgrade curricula.
4. While continuing the emphasis on basic skills, the curricula must include the teaching of higher-order skills.
5. Examine use of student time—of time required for assignments in light of what is learned as well as the structure of the school day, (i.e., time on task).

*Bertrand Evans and James Lynch, *High School English Textbooks* (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1963).

6. The time and expense required for individualized instruction — a growing trend — should be carefully analyzed in order to determine whether this method is an effective use of instructional time and the educational dollar.
7. Evaluate the results of pre-school education to determine whether the gains are sustainable and how the programs should be funded.
8. The kindergarten year should have increased academic content.
9. Meaningful homework should be consistently assigned beginning in the early years of school. It should be systematically collected, and checked, and should determine to some extent — however small — what a student's grade in any given course will be.
10. The value of work, good study habits, a positive attitude, an appreciation of learning, self-discipline, and ethical behavior should be incorporated into the curricula, especially in the early years of school.
11. Re-establish the school's authority to demand and maintain discipline.
12. Require pre-kindergarten screening procedures to identify special strengths and needs, especially deterrents to reading ability, and provide assistance when necessary. Children who enter school with advanced skills should not be allowed to stagnate while others catch up.
13. Comprehensive testing programs should be instituted to monitor student achievement, especially in relation to student potential. Remediation or intervention, particularly in the early years, must be available for those who need it.
14. Tests that include accurate identification of underachievers should be administered, and the results effectively utilized.
15. Students should not move through the grades without mastering the necessary skills. The mastery learning programs currently in use should be carefully evaluated since there is not a consensus concerning their effectiveness in providing basic skills instruction.
16. Parents should have candid and thorough reports of their children's academic progress — reports which are based not only on how students are achieving according to the demands of the curriculum, but how they are achieving in comparison to their peers. Otherwise, parents will not have a realistic assessment of their children's progress.
17. Re-establish credibility in the measurement of academic progress.
18. Encourage and honor young scholars and artists as much as we do young athletes; give scholarships to top ACT and SAT scorers.

19. State departments of education should compile a list of all competitions, scholarships, grants, and contests and disseminate it to local school districts.
20. Our nation would be better served were greater effort given to meeting the needs of gifted and academically talented students.

The Teaching Profession

21. State boards of education should accept the responsibility for upgrading standards for teacher certification and accreditation. They should be aware of how teachers are trained to teach reading and review the results of this training.
22. Greater flexibility is needed to allow graduates with demonstrated knowledge in their fields, but without the required hours in education courses, to teach other than basic skills.
23. Separate certification should be established for middle-school teachers to include required training in the problems of early adolescence.
24. Improve the screening of teacher candidates.
25. In-service programs should be structured around the needs of individual districts. Training in the teaching of higher-order skills is one area of need.
26. Compensation should be based on the teacher's ability to teach, as well as on years of schooling. Other incentives for retaining teachers should be instituted. Automatic salary increases should be abolished.
27. The issue of tenure should be more thoroughly discussed. Perhaps it would not be necessary if due process were incorporated into the dismissal procedure and both teachers and administrators were given clearly articulated, performance-related criteria against which they would be evaluated.
28. Decisions determining the appropriate subjects for, as well as the timing and duration of, negotiations between teacher unions and local boards should be open to the public. The total percentage of salary increase—including fringe benefits and increments—should be published as well as top salaries, instead of only beginning salaries. The cost of negotiating, itself, should be closely monitored.
29. The negotiation process must be shortened to make it less disruptive.
30. The effect of teacher unions on education should be thoroughly studied and reported.

Local Administration

31. Administrators and principals need better training and in-service programs, especially in the areas of evaluating personnel and developing in-service programs for staff.

32. Principals should establish themselves as educational leaders and give more attention to the curriculum.
33. Administrators' pay should be based on merit.
34. Apprenticeship programs and in-service training should be provided to school board members.
35. School board associations should help their members understand how to govern their districts effectively, and require accountability to the voters for student achievement.
36. The impact of the federal role in education on local school governance should be thoughtfully reviewed.
37. More effort should be made to identify and remove barriers to the reforms that would make the public school system more responsive and accountable.
38. Local school boards need more authority to govern their districts effectively.
39. School boards should represent parents more forcefully in decisions affecting student performance, including amount of homework, difficulty of materials, report card format, length of the school day, and requirements for graduation.
40. School boards should publicize clearly articulated policies and short- and long-range goals. They should base their evaluations of superintendents on how well their policies are implemented and their goals are achieved.
41. The policies and goals of the district school board should be reflected in the curriculum.
42. State legislatures should review and simplify their education codes.

Research

43. Evaluate the process of commissioning educational research and determine whether or not the federal government should be involved.
44. Valid research is needed in many areas, such as what motivates children to learn, how children learn, and the impact of drug use on the ability to learn.
45. The relationship between the economy and the literacy level of the populace must be clarified. Will increased literacy improve the economy? Would more people be productively employed if job requirements were not inflated, requiring degrees and levels of literacy unnecessary to the tasks?
46. Broader dissemination of good, workable ideas is needed; the National Diffusion Network could be expanded.
47. Funding should be provided for the dissemination of research findings to classroom teachers, administrators, and school board members.

48. School leaders should study the research on the "effective school" movement and emulate its successes.

The System and Structure of Education

49. National standards should be determined for certain skill levels — especially reading, writing, and math. Regardless of what tests are used, each school should report the degree to which students are meeting those national standards so that parents and teachers will be able to put student achievement into perspective. Since it is the only instrument currently readily available nationwide, perhaps all graduating seniors should take the GED test in order to provide national assessment data.
50. State standards for evaluating schools and school districts should be reviewed and, if necessary, improved.
51. Pilot projects should be implemented that allow children to begin school when they are deemed ready, regardless of chronological age, in order to determine whether students learn more under such circumstances, and whether later social problems are decreased by such a system.
52. More public discussion about the purpose and performance of the public schools is needed. Parents must have a larger role in the decision-making process, especially in reaching a consensus about what should be taught. This could be accomplished through a parent council in each school.
53. Competition in the educational marketplace, by use of vouchers and tuition tax credits that would be fair to those of all income levels should be objectively and unemotionally evaluated. If found to improve schooling, they should be encouraged.
54. The reasons for and results of student drop-outs need more comprehensive study, and more attention. Allowing students to enter adult basic education classes at younger ages may be one solution.
55. Alternatives to compulsory education, such as apprenticeships, should be examined.
56. Drop-outs should be allowed to return to finish school at any time, free of charge. Everyone should be entitled to complete the equivalent of 13 years of free schooling (kindergarten through 12th grade).
57. The determination of future work-force needs and the skills that will be required for employment, necessitate closer cooperation between business and education.
58. Employers' emphasis on the diploma for entry into the job market should be accompanied by equal emphasis on the academic skills necessary for successful employment.
59. There should be more communication between business and education. Teachers should incorporate understanding of the needs of the work force into their lessons.

National Attitudes Toward Education

60. In order for schools to become accountable for student achievement, several factors must be identified: what changes are needed, who should make them, any barriers to making the changes and the removal of such barriers.
61. The public needs to become more aware of and involved in the educational system, and to make its opinions known to elected representatives.
62. The President and the Secretary of Education should continue to focus national attention on the status of education in America.
63. Lawmakers, educators, and others must resist the temptation to apply quick fixes and must not succumb to excessive pressure from special interest groups; instead, short- and long-range planning to improve education for all is needed.
64. A presidential task force should be appointed to study the expenditure of federal education funds and school tax dollars to determine: (a) why many consider educational funding insufficient, even though funding has increased while enrollment has declined; (b) what areas are underfunded or overfunded; and (c) whether any savings can be realized.
65. Decision-makers within the commercial television industry must weigh carefully the short- and long-range ramifications of programming on the values and behavior of young people. They especially need to distinguish clearly between the portrayal of adult and youthful behavior and depict more young people who work hard and excel. A national study of the effects of television on youth should be conducted.

Illiteracy

66. It is respectfully recommended that the President or the Congress appoint a national task force to determine how reading is being taught, how reading should be taught, and how reading teachers are trained.
67. The discussion of how to teach reading should be expanded beyond the domain of educators to include the public.
68. National definitions of the various levels of literacy must be established and better data-gathering procedures instituted. More accurate estimates would enable legislators to better determine: (a)

how many of those eligible for adult basic education would refuse and how many would benefit from training; and (b) considering the return on the investment, whether we are spending enough on local, state, and national levels to combat adult illiteracy.

69. The military's research on illiteracy should be studied and relevant findings incorporated into current public education programs.
70. Attention should be given to illiterate adults on welfare. The possibility of requiring them to take advantage of educational opportunities in order to remove themselves from the welfare rolls should be considered.
71. Consideration could be given to shortening prison sentences somewhat for illiterate inmates who successfully complete reading programs.

Conclusion

Solutions to recent educational problems are possible, but we must understand that there will be opposition to real reform. Given the strength of the educational bureaucracy and the shortness of the national attention span, we may well be not only a nation at risk, but a nation at a loss about how to minimize the risk. Perhaps we do not lack the means, but rather the will to do what we should. We must continue our newly found vigilence. We must institute measures of accountability that include a record of student progress and an analysis of cost effectiveness. We must scrutinize our entire educational delivery system and focus on *learner outcomes* in order to determine what increases or decreases achievement. We must also identify the barriers to educational progress and remove them.

Complete report available
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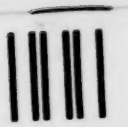

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